

# What You Should Know About Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci (VRE)



## COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

### What are Enterococci?

Enterococci are common germs that are found in the bowels of healthy people. There are many different types of these germs and they rarely cause illness in healthy people.

### What are Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci?

Vancomycin is an antibiotic used to treat serious infections. Sometimes, the enterococci germs become resistant to certain antibiotics, including Vancomycin. This means the drugs are no longer effective against them, making it harder to treat infection. These resistant germs are called Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci (VRE).

People may have VRE in their bowels without showing any signs of illness. These people are called carriers.

### Who gets VRE?

People who get VRE usually have other medical conditions which make them prone to infection. Such medical conditions include:

- critically ill patients in intensive care units;
- patients with severe underlying disease or problems with their immune systems;
- patients in hospital who have had major surgery;
- patients with urinary catheters; and
- patients who have received many antibiotics.

Healthy people are unlikely to get VRE. If healthy people do get VRE, they usually have it only for a short time and rarely become ill.

### What is the treatment for VRE?

Treatment for illness caused by VRE is difficult because the germ resists most antibiotics. Treatment plans will be determined by your physician.

### How are VRE spread?

Enterococci, including VRE, are normally found in the human bowel and are passed from the body through feces. Enterococci can be found on people's hands, or on things that are touched such as toilet seats, door handles or furniture. VRE are passed from one person to another by direct contact with feces, or indirectly through equipment or materials that have the germs on them. They are not spread through the air.

### How is the spread of VRE prevented?

Diarrhea, especially when it is uncontrolled, poor hygiene and inadequate cleaning increase the likelihood of transmission of this germ. If you or someone you are living with or visiting has VRE, the following measures should be taken.

- **Hand washing.** The most important way to prevent the spread of VRE is to wash hands well with soap and water for 10-15 seconds.
- **Cleaning.** Regular cleaning with household cleaners is important. As the germs are found in feces, toilets and bathroom facilities should be cleaned regularly.
- **Personal Hygiene.** Persons with VRE should not be restricted from moving freely throughout their homes and communities. However, they must clean themselves well after a bowel movement, and then wash

their hands thoroughly. If a person with VRE has uncontrolled bowel movements, diapers should be used to prevent the spread of the germ.

- **Laundry and waste disposal.** No special precautions are necessary as VRE are destroyed during the normal laundering process. Garbage can be bagged for pick-up as usual.

### **Are family members at risk when a patient has VRE?**

Patients with VRE do not pose a risk to their family, especially if hand washing and normal cleaning measures are followed.

### **Where can I get more information?**

For further information, call your local public health unit (municipal and provincial listings in the grey pages at the back of the telephone book).

